Gerow talks about many facets of the *benshi* and the Japanese film industry in this chapter of his book, *Visions of Japanese Modernity*. I am reading this chapter out of context so I might miss some overarching theme that Gerow is trying to convey. But my understanding of this chapter, and this chapter alone, is that Gerow is covering the time from the Pure Film Movement to the end of the *benshi* institution, and the criticism, disputes, and debates that surrounded these *benshi* entertainers during this period of time.

Critics from the Pure Film Movement, and up until recently, even Japanese scholars of Japanese cinema have viewed and written about the *benshi* with disdain. They viewed the *benshi* as a hindrance to the evolution of Japanese film. Because Japanese directors rely on the *benshi* as a crutch to get across the meaning of the film to the audience, they don’t even attempt to make their films self-sufficient, in terms of the story’s narration, thus hindering the development of domestic films. While critics attack the *benshi* for hampering the Japanese film industry, Noel Burch counters their criticisms by saying that the *benshi* was important in “preventing the colonization of Japanese film by Western definitions of the cinematic,” (Gerow 134) thus allowing the Japanese cinema to later develop in a way that was unique from the “dominant Hollywood mode” (Gerow 134).

Burch further defends the *benshi* by saying “spectators [of the film] are unable to enter the world of the diegesis because they remain aware of the film as something to be read, as only a text” (Gerow 134). Having the *benshi* on stage will take away the need for the audience to read the intertitles in the film, and thus allow them to be more immersed in the world within the film. Jeffrey Dym would agree with this point, and he would also input that this sort of discourse takes a certain amount of finesse and artistry to effectively connect the audience to the film. In other words, Dym believes that the *benshi’s* *setsumei* on stage is an art form that requires skills and experience to effectively describe the motion pictures on screen in a captivating way. Gerow, however, disagrees with Dym. He does not see *benshi* as artists.

Gerow claims that Dym is not voicing his argument from a “theoretical standpoint” (Gerow 134). Instead, he says Dym is romanticizing the *benshi* as neglected artists without considering “the ideological struggles over *benshi* and what it might have meant to call their work an art at the time” (Gerow 135). To Gerow, the *benshi* were simply explainers (Gerow 155), to support this debate he compounds on Yume Sobei’s argument that the *benshi* were paid to give linguistic translations of intertitles, and that their role did not include being independent artists, too (Gerow 155).

Before I read Gerow’s counterargument to Dym’s belief, that the *benshi* were neglected artists, I thought Dym’s point was objective and I just took it for a fact that the *benshi’s* *setsumei* was also an art form, like *kabuki* and *noh*, except that it just wasn’t acknowledged as such by the Japanese public. Reading Gerow’s side of the debate starts to put this discourse about *benshi* a little more into perspective for me, as I begin to see more than one side to every aspect of the *benshi* discourse.

Having read both Dym and Gerow’s points in the debate of whether *benshi* were artists or not, I have come to a marriage of the two sides that might or might not be true. For argument’s sake, we will agree that the *benshi* were paid to be translators of foreign intertitles and only that, translators. Although the *benshi’s* job description did not include being an oral artist, it is likely
that the *benshi* took the liberty of turning *setsumei* into an art form that is entertaining to the audience. The benefit in doing so is to distinguish themselves from other *benshi*, and also to attract people to watch their performances. Both of these are economical reasons, as it will ensure the *benshi*’s popularity among the people and prevent themselves from becoming disposable to the theater house. So, although the *benshi* were not paid to be oral artists, it was likely that they still became such to ensure their longevity in the business. I also noted a flaw in Gerow’s argument, if the *benshi* were hired only as translators, then why were there *benshi* who did *setsumei* for domestic films? Of course, this argument is always open to new insights, and perhaps you have an idea to contribute to this debate.

I have to admit, I actually found this piece a little difficult to understand because of all the critical discourse within this chapter. Since the topic of *benshi* is new to me, it was hard to figure out what information was real and what were just opinions of scholars. Seeing the arguments in this chapter rebuke some of the sources I have read has helped me to put things a little more into perspective. Not everything I read is fact, and I really should be more critical when I am looking at these sources. But that is what scholarship is about; it is about reading many different resources and discourses, it is about comparing these sources, and it is about debating and questioning the validity of what is available. But history is tricky, in that facts can get lost, or become murky or distorted through time.

Reviewed by Melissa Yang